

**Escure Recreation Improvements
Environmental Assessment OR135-07-EA-13
Border Resource Area, Spokane District**

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposes to improve recreational facilities at its Rock Creek Recreation Area, Towell Falls trailhead location, approximately 20 miles south of Sprague, WA (see map: Attachment 1). The site of the proposed improvements is located in Whitman County, approximately 50 miles southwest of Spokane and 18 miles south of Sprague, within the Scattered Tracts Management Area of the Border Resource Area, Spokane District BLM. The location legal description of the immediate vicinity of the proposed improvements is T18N, R39E, Sec. 31.

Background

BLM acquired the Rock Creek Recreation Area in 1999, to promote wildlife-based recreation, improve riparian and wetland conditions, protect important cultural features and natural habitats, and provide for grazing use. Along with promoting these purposes, the Rock Creek Management Area Interim Management Plan created in 2000 (see Attachment 3), with special visitor rules, remains in effect until a final management plan is created for the area. Those rules require that: 1) motor vehicle use is limited to designated roads only, 2) the area is closed to overnight use, 3) campfires, gas, or charcoal fires are not allowed, 4) due to safety concerns and their historic value, the ranch buildings and their premises are off-limits to the public, and, 5) visitors need to pack out all litter and observe private property boundaries.

This area contains unique geological features representative of the lasting effects of ancient volcanic flows and ice-age cataclysmic flood events that created a landscape of exceptional natural beauty. Almost eight miles of spring fed Rock Creek, one of the remnant flood channels, bisects the property. This creek valley provides incredible views of the high cliffs and mesas created by the ice-age floods. Wall Lake is an approximately 0.5 mile long lake situated in the northwest portion of the parcel and accessed from Breeden Road. Both Rock Creek and Wall Lake provide habitat for game fish and other wildlife and wildflower species. Recreation opportunities include hunting, fishing, hiking, biking, horseback riding, geology, wildlife and wildflower viewing.

Private land that is adjacent to the Rock Creek Recreation Area consists of additional shrub-steppe, channeled scabland habitat, and rolling loess hills. Livestock grazing and wheat farming are the predominant use on this private land. One section (640 acres) of State land is enclosed within the BLM parcel, and located less than 1/2 mile west of the old ranch house complex.

Issues:

Internal scoping by BLM revealed the following issues related to the proposed action. These issues were considered in defining the purpose and need, development of alternatives, and to focus the environmental analysis.

1. Existing facilities are not sufficient to support current or anticipated future recreational use.
2. Livestock grazing may interfere with recreational experience of visitors.
3. Current and projected increased recreational use may threaten natural resources including riparian vegetation, wildlife, and geological resources, as well as cultural resources.

Purpose and Need for Proposed Action

During the past nine years since BLM acquired the Rock Creek Recreation Area, recreational use has increased. Recreational experiences are hindered by the limited availability of sufficient facilities to meet demand, including the current absence of an outhouse accessible by persons with disabilities.

Hence, the purpose of the trailhead improvements would be to support increasing recreational visitor use of the area, and maintain desirable hygienic and visual standards. For these purposes there is a need to define specific parking, trailhead and camping areas, and to meet other needs associated with increasing recreational use. Therefore, the objectives are:

1. Provide facilities to support current and anticipated recreational use;
2. Create new recreation opportunities (e.g. developed picnicking and legal overnight camping with campfires allowed);
3. Improve overall recreation experience;
4. Reduce conflicts between livestock grazing and recreational experiences while providing for both uses;
5. Provide outreach and education to the public on the cultural and natural resources of the area;
6. Reduce recreational user negative impacts on infrastructure and range management.

Conformance with Land Use Plan

The proposed action is in conformance with the Records of Decision for the Spokane District Resource Management Plan (1987) and the Spokane Resource Management Plan Amendment (1992). The proposed action would contribute toward accomplishment of one of the general management objectives of the RMP (1987) which is to “Manage public lands and keep access routes open for a variety of recreational opportunities/experiences, including both motorized and non-motorized recreation activities.”

Description of the Alternatives

Two alternatives were considered: Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) and Alternative 2 (No Action). A description of each alternative is provided below.

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) see “Project Detail” drawing: Attachment 2

Develop an area for general use picnicking and overnight camping. The Interim Management Plan currently limits visitors to day use only, and forbids campfires, gas, or charcoal fires. Since overnight camping currently is not permitted, visitors, especially during hunting season, camp along roadsides or at nearby state land, where they sometimes have open campfires. Many visitors, including hikers, hunters, fly fishermen, and horseback riders who have driven long distances to visit this area, have requested camping access. This proposed action would change the Interim Management Plan to allow overnight camping in a semi-developed setting, and provide fire rings on mowed ground within which campfires would be allowed. These changes would offer visitors a unique experience in this scenic area, while reducing wildland fire risk.

Increase parking capacity, and facilitate better access and turn-around. General use area parking will be expanded and enclosed by fencing, and equestrian parking will be outside (north) of the fence. In its present condition, parking is limited at the Towell Falls Trailhead, with little room and turn around space for recreational vehicles and trucks with trailers.

By design, the improvements will keep cattle that are co-located on the parcel, and horses, out of the picnicking/camping/parking area designated for general public use. Wooden rail, and/or smooth wire/barbless fencing, and other facilities would keep these animals from entering the general use area. Both equestrian and general use visitors would have easy access to the livestock-free general use area.

The design will preserve access to allow transportation of cattle across the bridge, and livestock herding outside of the enclosed general use area, and maintain efficient administrative access for BLM to cross the bridge.

BLM would also install a permanent, single vault, handicapped accessible outhouse and make additional recreational improvements at the Rock Creek Recreation Area, in the vicinity of the Towell Falls trailhead.

Construction likely would be done in phases over a year's time or longer, but taking no more than 15 total days of construction. Specific details of these improvements are outlined below and shown in the diagram found in Attachment 2.

- Create a general use parking/picnicking/camping area from which livestock, including horses, are excluded.
 - 1) Install a cattle guard at existing vehicle entrance point to trailhead area, at the east end of the access road.
 - 2) Create a southern graveled loop parking area and semi-developed campsites within the general use area. Wooden rail or smooth wire/barbless wire fencing would be added to extend around the newly developed area that extends approximately 250 ft. southward from the access road, so as to better accommodate visitors. The southern graveled loop will be approximately 75 ft. x 200 ft., and have 8-10 graveled parking spurs, separated far enough apart to allow a campsite associated with each parking slot, and install picnic tables

and fire rings with gravel around them at each campsite. Install one vehicle gate through the extended fence to allow seasonal vehicle access through to Towell Falls. Sign the general use area as livestock free.

- 3) In its same location, replace existing barbed wire fence immediately south of the access road in the current trailhead area, with wooden rail half fence, or smooth wire/barbless wire fencing, as far east as cattle guard, or leave it as it is. Although the enclosed general use area continues north of this fence, this section of fencing should be left where it is as a buffer between the access road and the general use camping area. Leave in place, or remove, the vehicle pass gate to Towell Falls Road that is along this fence – this entrance point will also provide access to the southern graveled loop. If not building a half fence, add a non-motorized pass gate midway along this fence to allow campers/picnickers easy access to the outhouse. Add another non-motorized pass gate in the full fence at its east end, fairly close to the cattle guard and inside the trailhead area, but outside of the enclosed general use parking/camping area, to provide access from the east side of the general use area to the south pasture.
- 4) Relocate existing barbed wire fencing immediately north of the access road in the current Towell Falls trailhead/parking area, to approximately 50 ft. northwest of its current location, parallel to the existing fence, with wooden rail fencing or smooth wire/barbless wire fencing. The extra room provided by moving the fence makes room for several picnic tables accessible by equestrians yet separated from livestock and the equestrian camping area (detailed below), and near the proposed outhouse. Install a non-motorized pass gate in this fence towards its east end, close to the proposed vault outhouse, to allow visitor pedestrian access between the equestrian parking/camping area and the enclosed general use area.
- 5) Install a permanent single vault accessible outhouse at north east corner of enclosed general use area. Move existing line of boulders in parking lot and place them around new outhouse to protect it from vehicles. It would replace two rental portable outhouses currently placed at the site during the fishing and hunting seasons. These rental outhouses are not accessible for persons with disabilities, have limited waste holding capacity (requiring additional maintenance during times of increased visitation), and experience vandalism from time to time.
- 6) Relocate cattle holding catch corrals (panels) from their present location, across the bridge to the vicinity of the ranch buildings. Potentially, the grazing lessee will remove them completely and use existing cattle holding facilities across the bridge.
- 7) Leave in place the barbed wire fence, vehicle gate, and non-motorized pass gate separating the existing parking area from the bridge over Rock Creek at the west end of the access road.

- 8) Add non-motorized pass gate in barbed wire fence immediately south of access road, just east of (outside) proposed cattle guard, to allow cattle offloading and access to south pasture outside of enclosed general use area.
- Develop equestrian use camping and facilities. Since equestrians comprise a prominent segment among all of the site's recreational users, coming for hunting and horseback riding, and potentially in the future for hunting dog trials, they need to be accommodated. The design will allow for staking horses and dog packs close to equestrian vehicle trailers, outside of the fenced-in general use area. This is to maximize quality of experience for both general use and equestrian groups, by keeping horses and dog packs and their waste outside the general use area, and to minimize disturbance of staked horses and dog packs by general use visitors.

The design would create an equestrian parking/camping area immediately north of the enclosed general use area.

- 1) Create a northern graveled loop parking area, approximately 80 ft. x 220 ft. with 7 - 9 angled graveled parking spurs approximately 40 feet long. A graveled entrance road would be created, that spurs off of the access road on the west side of the cattle guard, and follows along (outside of) the northeast fencing enclosing the general use area.
- 2) Construct three or four approximately 15 ft. x 15 ft. wooden corrals along the existing fence line at the east edge of the north pasture, within the equestrian camping area, to hold horses.
- 3) Move existing stock water trough to alongside the wooden corrals (south of them), install a wildlife escape ramp, and develop existing water source to fill it. Stock trough should be far enough away from outhouse to discourage human consumption of the water. It will be signed as unfit for human consumption.
- 4) Leave in place non-motorized pass gate in north-south barbed wire fence just outside northwest corner of enclosed general use area, to allow north pasture livestock access to bridge and Rock Creek.
- Add second informational kiosk or interpretive panel(s) near bridge crossing inside northwest corner of enclosed general use area to: 1) provide background on the historic sheep ranch across the bridge, and 2) interpret in a manner so as to help limit ground disturbance to vegetation/riparian, wildlife, cultural, and geological resources.

Project Design Features

- An intensive BLM class III cultural resources inventory will be conducted in the area of potential effect prior to project implementation. If historically significant resources, traditional cultural properties or sacred areas are identified, the project will be redesigned to avoid them. If the sites cannot be avoided, consultation with

the Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (DAHP), consulting tribes and interested public will be conducted.

- If significant cultural or paleontological resources are located prior to or during project implementation, the project will be redesigned to avoid the resource. If the resource cannot be avoided, the locality will be evaluated and mitigation will be conducted. If any cultural or paleontological resources are encountered during project implementation, the disturbing activity will be halted and a BLM archaeologist will be notified for appropriate action.
- The project area will be field inventoried for special status plants prior to ground-disturbing activities. If special status plants are found, effects will be assessed and the project may be modified to protect the population.
- To protect the maternity colony of Yuma myotis bats, the interpretive displays will not contain specific information identifying the bat barn as a point of interest. The existing bars on the barn's windows will be periodically inspected and repaired if necessary to prevent human entry. Monitoring will include yearly exit counts to determine if increased use affects population status.

Alternative 2 (No Action)

BLM would continue to manage the Rock Creek Recreation Area under the interim management plan, including continued prohibition of overnight camping and campfires, gas, or charcoal fires. The Towell Falls trailhead site would remain in its current condition. BLM would make no trailhead improvements and continue to seasonally rent temporary toilets.

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

Assumption: It is likely that facilities improvements will attract more visitors. Therefore, for purposes of this analysis, BLM assumed that if facility improvements were implemented, recreational use would increase.

Water Quality:

Rock Creek is a unique perennial cold water channeled scablands stream mostly fed by springs and outflow from Rock Lake. The springs are fairly consistently at 52 degrees temperature. It is a quality recreational fishery for both rainbow and brown trout. The affected environment includes Rock Creek and a small spring in the area of the proposed facilities improvements that provides the water source to fill the stock/wildlife watering trough. Rock Creek is a year-around stream, and is identified as a "Class B" Surface Water by the Washington Department of Ecology. The spring is primarily sub-surface, and its water is transported to the trough through a plastic hose from its source approximately 40 yards southeast (uphill) from the proposed watering trough location.

Under the Proposed Action alternative, which would likely result in increased recreation use, development of campsites and installation of vaulted toilets would have a negligible

or no effect to the water quality of Rock Creek. A rare instance of horse fecal matter washing into the creek could occur due to storm activity, but that would have an insignificant impact to water quality.

Under the No Action alternative, no significant impacts to water quality are expected to occur. The existing chemical toilets are not close enough to surface water to affect water resources. The predicted increase in recreational use is not expected to have an adverse influence on water quality, which would continue to meet or exceed State of Washington water quality standards for a Class B stream.

Vegetation /Plant Communities:

The site of the Proposed Action has been subject to livestock grazing for many years, and the portion of the site that is outside of the existing pasture fences receives ongoing disturbance by foot and horse traffic, and by vehicles parking along the roadside. Non-native species characteristic of disturbed areas, including cheatgrass, bulbous bluegrass, tumble mustard, and fiddleneck, are common at the site. Non-native invasive species are addressed in the Noxious Weeds section. The Proposed Action will result in removal of some vegetation and further soil disturbance in the process of constructing the trailhead improvements and installing the toilet, and it is likely that foot and horse traffic from recreationists will increase as a result of the improved facilities. However, because the site is already heavily disturbed, the Proposed Action and the increased use that may result from the action are unlikely to change the composition of the vegetation at the site. Under the No Action alternative, the vegetation will continue to experience disturbance from grazing (inside the current pasture areas) and from recreational activities.

No Special Status plant species are known to occur within the area where the Proposed Action is to take place. Special Status species that have been specifically surveyed for in and near the site of the Proposed Action include *Silene spaldingii* (Spalding's catchfly), currently listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and listed as Threatened by the Washington Department of Natural Resources; and *Polemonium pectinatum* (Washington polemonium), which is a Bureau Sensitive species and a Washington Threatened species.

One population of *S. spaldingii* is recorded within the Escure/Rock Creek property over two miles from the site of the Proposed Action; the plant has not been found elsewhere within the property boundaries. The site of the Proposed Action is flat ground that has experienced severe and repeated disturbance, and it is not suitable habitat for *S. spaldingii*, which is typically found on gently to moderately sloping sites, usually with a north facing aspect, that are dominated by *Festuca idahoensis* (Idaho fescue) and are minimally disturbed. Neither the Proposed Action nor the No Action alternative will result in any impacts to this species.

Polemonium pectinatum is a regional endemic limited to several counties in eastern Washington, including Whitman and Adams counties; it occurs on creek terraces and in upland swales. It is sometimes found in sites that have a mixture of native and introduced species, but is unlikely to persist in sites that are heavily dominated by

introduced plants. Although some locations within the area of the Proposed Action have topographic and edaphic characteristics that are suitable for *P. pectinatum*, the severity and extent of past disturbance makes it highly unlikely that this species would occur on the site. *P. pectinatum* has not been reported from any locations on or near the Escure/Rock Creek property, so there will be no impacts to this species from the Proposed Action or from the No Action alternative.

Noxious Weeds:

Noxious weed inventories, monitoring, and treatments are ongoing within the Escure Ranch unit. Noxious weed treatments include, chemical (herbicides), biological (insects & livestock grazing), mechanical (mowing), and cultural (plantings and seeding). The primary noxious weed species within the Escure Ranch unit include Russian & diffuse knapweed, rush skeletonweed, whitetop, Scotch thistle and poison hemlock. The spread of noxious weeds throughout the Escure unit is influenced by livestock and wildlife movement, human disturbances, windborne seed dispersal and from seasonal high flows in Rock Creek. All noxious weed treatments are done in accordance with the Record of Decision for the Final Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on Bureau of Land Management Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (DOI 2007), the Escure Vegetation Restoration Project Environmental Assessment No. OR-135-00-01 (BLM 1999) and all applicable State of Washington laws, rules and regulations.

Under the Proposed Action, the spread of noxious weed populations may increase as a result of existing conditions, and due to increased recreational use and subsequent surface disturbance.

Under the No Action alternative, noxious weed populations would continue to spread due to the influences described in the Affected Environment section above. Therefore there are no impacts associated with the No Action alternative.

Riparian/Water Resources/Fisheries:

Rock Creek is a unique perennial cold water channeled scablands stream mostly fed by springs and outflow from Rock Lake. The springs are pretty consistently at 52 degrees temperature. Rock Creek usually has early high water events in late winter, February/March. Some times these runoff events carry quite a bit of sediment from agriculture lands upstream of the BLM Rock Creek Management area. It is a quality recreational fishery for both rainbow and brown trout. Most of the fish are recruited from Rock Lake where they are planted by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) as catchable size yearlings. Many fish end up downstream during high water events in both Rock Lake and Rock Creek. Because of the catch and release special gear regulations the adult fish are very large and provide a great recreation fishery. Rock Creek is especially popular with local fly fishing clubs in the Spokane and Northern Idaho area.

Towell Falls is a barrier to some upstream migration, but there have been several reported incidents of rainbow trout clearing the falls during high water runoff events.

The native riparian galleries of willow and cottonwood have been removed over the past 150 years by grazing, firewood cutting, burning and herbicide spraying. The current riparian vegetation is thin and small compared to the previous natural riparian plants, but many areas still contain a good diversity of willows, waterbirch, wild rose, and dogwood. BLM has made several attempts to plant willow trees along the creek. However, high mortality and stunted growth of planted trees have not resulted in replacement of the native riparian galleries.

Under the Proposed Action there is some possibility that the development of a recreational camping site, with adjacent horse facilities could concentrate horse manure in the corrals and depending upon weather conditions or specific storm events there could be an occasional pulse of horse fecal matter into the creek. However, this will probably be insignificant because of the small number of equestrian visitors and dry climate. Large amounts of horse fecal matter are not expected, therefore no input of fecal matter to the stream is expected and no impacts to Riparian/Water Resources/Fisheries will occur.

There are no anticipated impacts from the No Action alternative. Everything should remain the same and no direct or indirect effects to the fisheries or riparian vegetation.

Wildlife:

No threatened, endangered, or BLM sensitive wildlife species occur in the project area, so no impacts to these species or their habitats would occur.

Mule Deer: Mule Deer are common on the Rock Creek Recreation Area and hunting pressure on them is high. Approximately 100-200 hunters use the Rock Creek Recreation Area each fall because it is the largest area of public land in the region. Mule deer populations in central and eastern Washington are stable, and the goal set by WDFW is to maintain populations within habitat limitations (Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the 2009-2015 Game Management Plan, WDFW 2008). As with other areas of the channeled scablands, arid conditions are the limiting factor for mule deer populations with deer experiencing their greatest physiological stress in summer from dry, low-nutrient forage and scarcity of water. The campground development is located in an important riparian area that contains lush forage and flowing water, and recreational activities would displace deer from using portions of this habitat near the campground. However, deer have already been displaced from extensively using the riparian zone in this area because of current and past use of the parking area. Therefore, there would be no change in the baseline of available habitat due to development of the campground. The increased hunting pressure, due to the increased capacity of the campground, would be the only effect on mule deer. Because WDFW manages populations with bag limits set for each Game Management Unit considering the larger Population Management Unit, the mule deer population size would not be affected by increased hunting pressure at the Rock Creek Recreation Area. The only effect would be a localized decrease in successful hunts due to more competition among the higher numbers of hunters expected to be drawn to the campground.

Upland Game Birds: Pheasant and chuckar are popular (non-native) game birds at the Escure Ranch. State-wide, pheasant populations have been declining since the 1980's. Chuckar harvests, and presumably population sizes, have been on a slow decline over the last 10 years. Cold springs and summer droughts are suspected to be the cause of these declines (Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the 2009-2015 Game Management Plan, April 18, 2008, WDFW). Impacts to upland game birds would be similar to those on mule deer.

Yuma Myotis Bat Colony: The largest maternity colony of Yuma myotis in eastern Washington is present in the old barn across the river from the proposed campground improvement project. The bats are usually present from April through October each year. Population levels of the bats have varied over the years and have been impacted by unauthorized human entry to the barn. When discovered in 1999, approximately 1000 individuals were seen swarming around the barn, but in 2000 and again in 2001 unauthorized entry by the public caused the bats to abandon the roost having unknown, but certainly detrimental impacts on reproduction. BLM secured the barn from public entry in 2002-3 and installed bat boxes to allow for additional roosting space. Population levels, as estimated by exit surveys, have increased each year since the closure of the bat barn. The lowest count was 468 bats in 2003 (just after the disturbance), then 982 in 2005, 1033 in 2006, and finally 1376 bats in 2007. Yuma myotis are susceptible to human disturbance at maternity colonies. The expected increase in visitor use of the Rock Creek Recreation Area is not likely to affect the bat colony as long as visitors stay out of the barn. Most of the increased use would be during the October hunting season when the juvenile bats are grown and the colony is in the process of migrating out of the barn. Increased use may even discourage vandals from disturbing the barn since other campers may witness illegal activities, whereas previously the secluded nature of the area made it prone to such disturbance.

As described above, there would be no impacts to wildlife caused by the Proposed Action alternative, unless due to wildland fire. Under the No Action alternative there would be no effects to wildlife. Recreation use would continue at lower levels than under the proposed action, but there would be no change from the baseline in deer and game bird populations. Human disturbance to the bat barn would also remain the same as baseline conditions.

Cultural Resources, Native American Values, and Paleontological Resources:

Ethnographic and historical records document the use of lands in present-day Whitman and Adams Counties by a number of culturally and linguistically distinct Native American peoples. As with other Native Americans in the Columbia Plateau, these groups were highly mobile, traveling across the region to gather roots, salmon, and other important resources as they became seasonally available. Although ethnographic and archaeological data for the Rock Creek Recreation Area is limited, archaeological resources on the lower Palouse and Snake Rivers indicate intensive Native American use of the canyons along the river systems. Occupation sites have been recorded within both the Rock Creek drainage and the Palouse River drainage. Certain lands in the region continue to be used by Native Americans today for root-digging and other traditional

activities.

As early as the 1860s large numbers of Euro-Americans had begun to pass through the Escure Ranch vicinity, following Native American and historical trails. The Mullan Road, an important historic travel route dating from the 1860s to the 1880s, is located on the western edge of the Rock Creek Recreation Area. A second historic travel route, the Texas Road, is located several miles east of the property. Permanent Euro-American settlement of lands in the Rock Creek Recreation Area vicinity occurred between the 1880s and 1920s, with many of the settlers taking up sheep and cattle ranching. By 1910 the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad had been constructed just north of the Escure property, allowing local farmers and ranchers to ship their agricultural products to distant markets. The Escure Ranch facility, located west of the proposed recreation development area, was evaluated and determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its historic values as an early to mid 20th century sheep ranch. The project area was included in Cultural Resources inventories in 1999 and 2002. No cultural material was found in the APE.

No impacts to historic properties are expected with implementation of the project design features previously described for the Proposed Action, or from the No Action Alternative. In order to avoid negative impacts to possible undiscovered subsurface cultural materials a BLM Archaeologist must be present for all excavation.

Fire:

To date, no wildland fires have occurred under BLM management at the Rock Creek Recreation Area. Seasonal fire restrictions, livestock grazing, range management, regular mowing of some vehicle routes and adjacent vehicle access areas, prohibition of open fires in dispersed recreation settings, and law enforcement patrols have all contributed to wildland fire prevention. Nevertheless, increased recreational use, whether in an undeveloped or developed campsite setting, is likely to increase risk of wildland fire. This risk is elevated when area grasses become tinder dry during summer/fall seasons.

There is some history of camping along the roadside in undeveloped areas (especially along Breeden Road), and concurrent abuses include cutting fences to create parking/camping space; leaving firewood behind that is an impediment to range management; parking in tall, dry grass; and making campfires on open ground. The two latter abuses both constitute wildland fire hazards. Due to budgetary constraints, the distant location of this area, and the very sporadic occurrence of these abuses, BLM currently has a limited capability to provide law enforcement patrols to deter these types of abuses.

Under the Proposed Action alternative, overnight camping and picnicking use would be concentrated within the setting of well-defined, maintained (mowed and graveled) campsites within which open fires would be allowed only in the provided fire rings. Eventually, as improved facilities attract increased visitation, even with the benefit of this controlled setting, the chance of wildland fires being started by recreational use would likely increase proportional to the amount of increased use.

Although the current policy prohibits open campfires, visitors still often make them. Therefore, a significant amount of fire risk already exists, especially since currently, open campfires are built without the safety feature that fire rings provide.

Under the No Action alternative, the potential for starting wildland fires would increase proportionally to increased recreational use, especially from prohibited open campfires in dispersed lands settings, and from ignition from the hot undersides of vehicles parked off-road in dry grass. Other causes could include carelessness with matches, stoves, and lit tobacco products, that would be more hazardous in an undeveloped setting.

Recreation:

The BLM acquired the Rock Creek Recreation Area in 1999 and since that acquisition, recreational use has steadily been increasing. An estimated 9,000 people visited this area during 2007 (BLM Recreation Management Information System data). The Interim Management Plan (see Attachment 3) with special visitor use rules remains in effect until a final management plan can be completed.

Existing trailhead site facilities include a fenced, graveled parking area, information kiosk, seasonally rented portable toilets, and informational signing. The primary recreation uses in this area are hunting, hiking and horseback riding. Other uses include fishing, wildlife/wildflower viewing, and mountain biking.

By expanding the parking area; providing a livestock-free general use area; and adding campsites, picnic tables, fire rings, horse corrals, and an outhouse accessible by persons with disabilities, the Proposed Action would accommodate current peak capacity needs, and be in place to meet future expected capacity needs for all recreational visitors, thereby helping protect visual, natural and cultural resources now, and for years into the future.

Currently, parking capacity becomes stressed primarily during autumn big game hunting season and during non-hunting recreational group horseback rides. Vehicle and trailer access and turn-around space is limited. A continued increase in recreational use will further exceed capacity for parking and other existing facilities. Without any facilities improvements, an increase of conflicts could occur between visitors vying for parking spots, especially during peak use periods.

Visitors will continue to be frustrated when, lacking developed campsites, they are forced to look for dispersed camping opportunities. Those who have traveled long distances to pursue one or more favorite recreational activities available at this site, such as hunting, horseback riding, fishing, hiking, or mountain biking, would not be able to enjoy the increased quality of experience, and new recreation opportunities, associated with semi-developed overnight camping and picnicking opportunities and improved facilities.

Overnight camping is currently prohibited in the trailhead area under the Interim Management Plan, as is having campfires, gas, or charcoal fires. Implementing the Proposed Action alternative would change district policy to allow these activities.

Under the Proposed Action, access to an outhouse would be provided for persons with disabilities, and sanitation would be improved for all visitors. The new permanent concrete vault outhouse would be easier to maintain, have greater holding capacity, and be accessible by persons with disabilities. Adding the proposed recreational facilities would also satisfy requests from visitors to provide such facilities.

The proposed improvements could help eliminate some types of negative recreational impacts to certain areas. By establishing specific vehicle routes and improving campground facilities, the general public would have a defined staging/parking/camping/picnicking area and therefore be less likely to expand these activities into undefined areas, thereby reducing threat of damage to protected resources, as well as the threat to hygienic standards.

Visual resources could also become adversely impacted due to vandalism; as well as garbage, human waste, and firewood left behind at dispersed campsites and picnic sites, in varying locations across a large area. It is much harder to find and remove the refuse from these undeveloped sites, than from a single developed site with good access and an outhouse.

The Proposed Action alternative would not adversely impact any recreational activities or quality of recreational experience, except for potentially slightly reducing the hunt success rate for big game and upland game birds, due to increased competition linked to an increase in the number of hunters, attracted to the area by improved facilities.

Under the No Action alternative, BLM would continue to rent outhouses that are difficult to maintain during the high use season, and which are insufficient for persons with disabilities. Gradually increasing use would put pressure on those rental toilet facilities, and increase visitor frustration regarding limited recreational facilities, opportunities, and quality of experience, and potentially lead to an increase in visitor conflicts, especially when vying for limited parking space. Further, damages to existing infrastructure and facilities would possibly increase over time by people creating campsites in dispersed lands locations (roadside and elsewhere), which also could potentially result in damage to protected natural, cultural, and visual resources, and hygienic standards, as people spread out to find camping and picnicking sites.

Range:

The Rock Creek Recreation Area includes the lands within the Escure grazing allotment. The Escure Ranch historically was a working cattle ranch prior to acquisition by the BLM in 1999. The Escure allotment is currently grazed by 360 cow /calf pairs from November 15 through May 30. Additionally, 67 pairs graze from August 6 through November 14 on a portion of BLM administered lands that are fenced in with the Department of Natural Resource Lands. The grazing on the Escure allotment is an established rotational grazing system, with no single pasture receiving utilization during the growth period for perennial bunchgrasses more than one out of every three years. Actual seasons of use may vary depending on utilization levels and the rotation of

livestock may be changed accordingly. Soon after acquisition, the BLM re-built the bridge crossing Rock Creek to the ranch house and the permanent livestock handling facilities. The livestock handling facilities on the west side of Rock Creek will continue to be utilized to support livestock operations on the allotment. Current livestock utilization has shown to be compatible with recreational uses on the allotment, and is consistent with the multiple use policies of the BLM.

The Proposed Action alternative will exclude livestock from a small area and require the temporary livestock handling facilities be removed. Fencing and the exclusion of cattle from the proposed recreational area will mitigate any adverse encounters between recreational users and livestock. Signs will discourage parking in areas that will impede access across the bridge to permanent handling facilities. There will be no change in authorized use on the allotment. Therefore, no adverse impacts are expected to occur under the Proposed Action alternative.

The No Action alternative will not affect the current grazing authorization and livestock utilization of the allotment.

Other Resource Values Considered in the Analysis

The following resources were considered in this analysis, but determined to be either not present or not expected to be impacted: minority or low-income populations, air quality, prime or unique farmlands, special areas, wilderness, wastes (hazardous or solid), flood plain, invasive non-native species, paleontological resources , wild and scenic rivers, and potential energy and mineral resources.

Cumulative Effects:

Cumulative effects are described for each resource area, under each alternative for which significant impacts were determined to occur, as described in the Affected Environment section.

Noxious Weeds:

Under the Proposed Action, the spread of noxious weed populations may increase as a result of existing conditions, and due to increased recreational use and subsequent surface disturbance.

The Extent of Area of Concern for Impacted Resources includes the entire parcel, since increased recreational use could potentially extend to all areas within the parcel. The affected environment includes all ground surfaces impacted by motorized, foot and horse travel, and surrounding areas potentially impacted through weed spreading influences described in the Affected Environment section. The extent of the cumulative impacts would depend on the amount of increase of recreational uses over time.

Other activities and actions affecting the same resource include livestock use on the parcel, wildlife movement, potential wildfires, climatic affects (i.e. wind, rain, flooding),

and wind-born seed distribution from adjoining private lands, all for their ability to spread noxious weeds.

In summary, under the Proposed Action, the entire parcel may experience an increase in the spread of noxious weeds over time, assuming recreational use increases due to the proposed improvements, as well as from continued natural and human-influenced effects. These effects would not be directly attributable to impacts of the Proposed Action itself, but rather from the expected slow recreational use increase over time once people take advantage of the better recreational opportunities afforded by the improved facilities and changed rules. The overall impacts associated with expected increase in recreational use are negligible in comparison to the other natural and human caused influences on spread of noxious weeds identified in the Affected Environment section, and the effects would not constitute a major addition to the other impacts so long as proper integrated weed/pest management practices are used.

Fire:

Under the Proposed Action alternative, camping and picnicking would be concentrated within the setting of well-defined, maintained (mowed and graveled) campsites within which open fires are allowed only in the provided fire rings. Although campfires within this controlled setting is much preferable to open campfires in undeveloped user-defined campsite settings, eventually the chance of wildland fires being started by recreational use would increase proportional to an increase in the number of visitors attracted by improved facilities.

Upon completion of the proposed facilities improvements, this negative effect would most likely occur gradually, proportional to the amount of increased overnight camping use.

Under the No Action alternative, the potential for starting wildland fires would also increase proportionally to increased recreational use, especially from prohibited open campfires in dispersed lands settings, and from ignition from the hot undersides of vehicles parked off-road in dry grass. Other causes could include carelessness with matches, stoves, and lit tobacco products, that would be more hazardous in an undeveloped setting.

Drought may occur some years, which, along with lightning strikes, could contribute to the likelihood of wildland fires. Fire is unlikely to be introduced as a result of man-made fires started on neighboring lands.

These cumulative effects could extend throughout the parcel, wherever fire could spread. Under the Proposed Action alternative, fire would most likely originate in the vicinity of the installed fire rings. Under the No Action alternative, fire would most likely originate wherever dispersed recreation campsites are created by visitors, and are more likely to occur along roadsides where people camp in, or close to, their vehicle, and park hot vehicles in tall dry grass.

Recreation:

Under the Proposed Action alternative, adding improved facilities including a livestock-free camping/picnicking area, permanent vault outhouse, and an equestrian parking/camping area would:

- 1) increase the number of recreation opportunities available and improve the overall quality of recreation experiences. This could lead to increased recreational visitation, but would provide ample capacity for current and future use;
- 2) provide handicapped accessible facilities (permanent outhouse and picnic tables);
- 3) improve equestrian visitor facilities with capacity for current and future use (parking/camping area, co-located corrals and watering trough, shared use of livestock-free general use area);
- 4) likely reduce the amount of damage to existing infrastructure caused by people creating dispersed recreation campsites;
- 5) likely reduce the incidence of visitor conflicts, by providing ample parking/camping space for all visitors;
- 6) likely reduce negative impacts to visual, natural, and cultural resources, and preserve hygienic standards.

The mostly favorable cumulative effects of the Proposed Action alternative extend to the entire parcel, by focusing and improving camping and picnicking in a concentrated semi-developed location, thereby keeping associated negative impacts from those uses from spreading out to visitor-selected sites across the entire parcel.

Horseback riding, mountain biking, and local use are somewhat popular but sporadic on the John Wayne Trail, managed by Washington State Parks, about two miles north of the Rock Creek Recreation Area. Recreational users of that trail may desire to use BLM overnight camping facilities if they are improved and overnight camping becomes allowed. However, that additional use would be negligible in its amount and impacts. Also, horseback bird hunting dog trial events have become popular in Eastern Washington and permitted on BLM public lands, and these groups would benefit from having the opportunity to expand their activities to this location, potentially reducing adverse impacts at other more seasonally resource sensitive BLM sites within the BLM Spokane District.

The described cumulative effects under the Proposed Action alternative would start immediately upon construction of the proposed improvements, although an increase in visitation would most likely be gradual over time, possibly three years or longer before numbers increase substantially. An increased number of bird trial permitted events and organized horseback rides could well begin within a year's time, as could an increase in overnight camping, especially associated with hunting and fishing seasonally, and to a lesser degree for hiking and mountain biking.

Under the No Action alternative:

- 1) BLM would continue to rent outhouses that are difficult to maintain during the high use season, and which are insufficient for persons with disabilities;
- 2) an increase is expected in visitor frustration and complaints regarding limited

- recreational facilities, opportunities, and quality of experience. Overnight camping and open fires would continue to be prohibited, contributing to this problem;
- 3) minimal parking space would potentially lead to an increase in visitor conflicts, especially during seasonal peak use;
 - 4) damage to existing infrastructure is likely to increase, especially by people making room for campsites at roadsides and in other undeveloped areas;
 - 5) an increase in damage to protected natural, cultural, and visual resources, as well as hygienic standards, could also result without the addition of improved facilities and a developed campsite/picnic area since lacking them, people will seek out more unique areas, including sensitive areas, where they can do these activities, spread out over a large area.

Cumulative effects of the No Action alternative would be found at the existing Towell Falls trailhead/parking area, where conflicts between visitors could occur, and where currently minimal facilities exist, and extend to anywhere in the parcel where people decide to camp or picnic in an undeveloped setting.

Horseback riding, mountain biking, and local use are somewhat popular but sporadic on the John Wayne Trail managed by Washington State Parks, about two miles north of the Rock Creek Recreation Area, and recreational users of that trail would not be allowed to camp overnight on the BLM parcel under the No Action alternative, or have good equestrian facilities if they visited. Also, horseback bird hunting dog trial events permitted by BLM have become popular in Eastern Washington, and lack of facilities to accommodate them at this parcel would prevent BLM from redirecting events to it in the event resource protection needs outweighed provision of this recreation opportunity at other BLM recreation areas within the Spokane District.

Impacts from the described cumulative effects under the No Action alternative would most likely be gradual over time, possibly taking several years or longer before becoming significant enough to require administrative remedies. An exception could be an increase in visitor conflicts that would be worst during autumn peak hunting season, as soon as this year.

Coordination

This environmental assessment was prepared by an interdisciplinary team of BLM resource specialists representing various resource values, including botany, hydrology (water), wildlife habitat, recreation, fire, and cultural values.

BLM Specialists Who Provided Resource Input

Rich Bailey, District Archaeologist
Barb Benner, Border Resource Area Botanist
Scott Boyd, Spokane District Fire Management Officer
Kerrin Doloughan, Border Resource Area Range Specialist
Steve Ellersick, Border Resource Area Recreation Technician

Joe Kelly, Wenatchee Resource Area Riparian and Fisheries Specialist
Jason Lowe, Border Resource Area Wildlife Biologist
Scott Pavey, Spokane District Planning & Environmental Coordinator
Madilane Perry, Archaeologist
Diane Priebe, Wenatchee Resource Area Recreational Planner
Steve A. Smith, Spokane District Outdoor Recreation Planner
Robert Troiano, Border Resource Area Noxious Weeds and Water Quality Specialist
Jerry Wraspir, Border Resource Area Range Technician

Consultation

Consultation was initiated with:
Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, (5-21-2008)
Coeur d'Alene Tribe, (5-21-2008)
Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (5-21-2008)
Nez Perce Tribe, (5-21-2008)
Spokane Tribe, (5-21-2008)
Nez Perce Tribe, (5-21-2008)

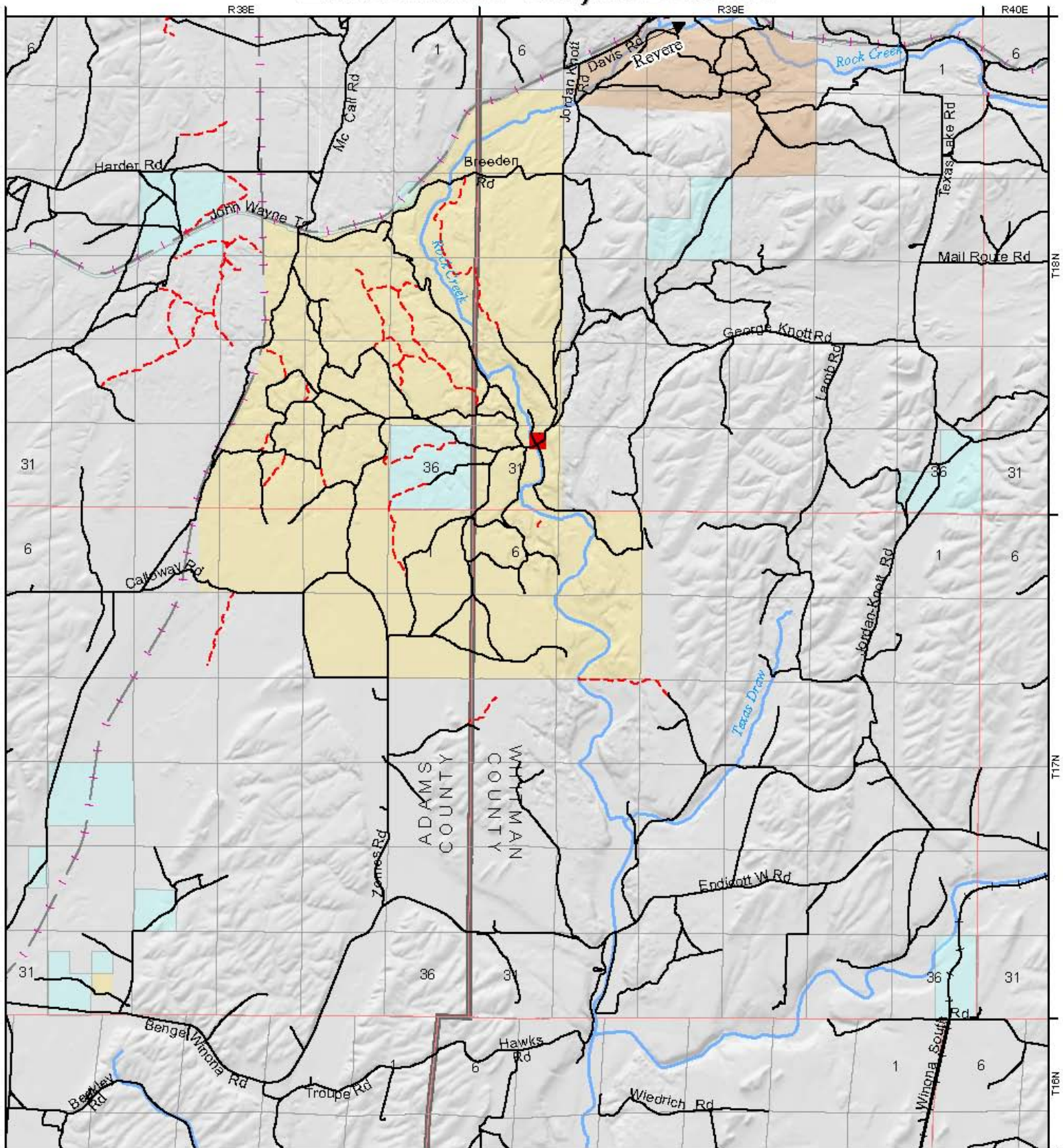
Other Outreach

This environmental assessment will be placed on the Spokane BLM District web page at www.blm.gov/or/districts/spokane/plans, to be available for future reference.

Enclosures:

Attachment 1: Map – “Project Location”
Attachment 2: Drawing – “Project Detail”
Attachment 3: Document – “Rock Creek Management Area Interim Management Status”

Proposed Recreation Improvements Escure Ranch - Project Location



- Road
- Trail
- Abandoned Railroads
- Streams
- Project Location
- Bureau of Land Management
- Department of Natural Resources
- WA Dept. of Fish and Wildlife

No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management as to the accuracy, reliability or completeness of these data for individual or aggregate use with other data. Original data were compiled from various sources and may be updated without notification.



WASHINGTON STATE

Proposed Recreation Improvements Escure Ranch



- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Proposed Kiosk | Proposed Vehicle Gate | Proposed Cattle Pen | Proposed Gravelled Loop |
| Existing Kiosk | Proposed Ped. Gate | Proposed Fence | Proposed Tent Camping |
| Proposed Out House | Existing Ped. Gate | Proposed Fence Move | Proposed Trailer Camping |
| Picnic Table | Existing Vehicle Gate | Proposed Horse Pens | Staging Area |
| Proposed Cattle Guard | Cattle Pen | Bridge | Pasture |
| Water Trough | Existing Fence | Road | |

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BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
SPOKANE DISTRICT OFFICE

ROCK CREEK MANAGEMENT AREA

Interim Management Status

The Rock Creek Management Area consists of 12,800 acres of annual grassland, basalt cliffs and pothole lakes in the heart of Palouse country. This dramatic landscape is home to an abundance of wildlife species. Nearly eight miles of Rock Creek provides additional quality fish habitat. The large amount of open space offers outstanding wildlife-based recreation opportunities to the public.

Location: Adams and Whitman Counties. From I-90, at Sprague, take Highway 23 south and turn right on Lamont Road. Turn left on Potts Road, left on Revere Road and right on Jordan Knott Road. The entrance to the Rock Creek Management Area will be on your left in 2.5 miles.

Off-Highway Vehicle Designation: 12,800 acres are limited to designated roads and trails.

Special Conditions: Interim management is in effect until a final management plan can be completed for this area. To promote wildlife-based recreation, improve riparian and wetland conditions and to protect important cultural features and natural habitats, special visitor use rules apply.

- **Motorized vehicle use is limited to designated roads only.** Designated roads are periodically marked with a green dot on a brown post. If you do not see this green dot system along the road you are on, it is closed to vehicle use. Closed roads are also posted with signs at the intersections. The Towell Falls Road will be closed seasonally due to fire danger and to protect the roadbed during wet conditions. Closures will be patrolled and enforced by BLM rangers. Roads which are closed to motor vehicles are open to foot, horse or bicycle travel. Metal pass gates are provided at locked gates to allow non-motorized use.
- **The Rock Creek Management Area is closed to overnight use.** Day use is allowed between the hours of 5:00 am and 10:00 pm only.
- **Campfires, gas or charcoal fires are not allowed.**
- Due to safety concerns and their potential cultural value, the **ranch buildings and their premises are off-limits to the public.**
- **Please pack out all litter and observe private property boundaries.**

Land Uses: Dispersed recreation: hunting, fishing, horseback riding, hiking, nature study, livestock grazing, wildlife and sensitive species habitat.

For more information on the Rock Creek Management Area or other BLM-administered lands in Washington, please contact the Spokane District Office at 1103 North Fancher, Spokane, WA 99212-1275, (509)536-1200. **Thank You**